[46] Chapter 3

Political, Administrative, and Judicial Organization of the Mossi Empire

I. Political and Administrative Organization

643 The Mossi empire of Ouagadougou was governed prior to the period of French occupation by a supreme chief, the Mogho Naba, who was revered by all his subjects as a "god" and whose territory, in the minds of his people, had no limits. He had the power of life and death over all his subjects.

[192] The word mogho means "country of the Mossi," but by extension it also means "the world." Thus, in this sense the Mogho Naba was regarded as the master of the world.

643 631 It is said that he had under his rule 333 chiefs, naba, among whom were his ministers, the three sogon'kassemsé (great servitors), and some forty petty chiefs called kougzindba, which refers to the heaps of stones designating the place of each minister or petty naba in the emperor's court.

643 177 The authority of the Mogho Naba over his vassals. In spite of the claims made by a colonial official who was trying to free the canton chiefs of one of the administrative districts of the colony from the authority of the Mogho Naba, the emperor's power never was merely nominal. If it has become so, it is a consequence of the intervention of French [47] administrative authority in the politics of the country -- an intervention which has resulted in assigning too much power to certain chiefs.

643 669 I do not mean to imply that before French penetration into the country there were not real conflicts, wars or mere skirmishes (1),

1. In Chapter 1 [not translated]we described in great detail the war waged by the Mogho Nabas Sanum and Wobgo against Lallé. We said also that Sanum warred with the Boussouma Naba and with Boulsa.

but the chiefs who tried by these means to free themselves from the emperor's authority were usually punished for their temerity.

567 Dagomba conquest. Both family type and slave status, indeed, re-
326 fer back to the Bobo, Gourounsi, etc.

000 We come now to public powers. We refer the reader to Appendix 32 /not translated/ for a study of property regulations and neighborhood relations, and plunge forthwith into the study of public powers.

631 We already know that the Mossi political organization is centralized. The villages belong to cantons, which are in turn gathered into provinces under direct administration or into mere vassal provinces. At the summit of the hierarchy stands the king, the Moro Naba, the supreme chief of the Mossi, who lives at Ouagadougou. To give an idea of the former importance, or at least relative importance, of this empire, we shall state that in the Ouagadougou
[162] circle alone there were eight provinces including among them 300 cantons, 5,000 villages or small towns, and 861,700 inhabitants.

643 Let us begin our description of this political organism with the head, that is, with the Moro Naba.

Moro Naba means "chief of the Mossi," from naba, "chief" and Moro or Mora which means Mossi in the singular. Moro yields Mossi or Mossé in the plural. (The French have grown accustomed to saying "one Mossi, several Mossi," but this is a barbarism and one should /568/ actually say, "one Moro, several Mossi," just as one says, "one Gourounga, several Gourounsi," "one Kipirga, several Kipirsi," etc.). As for the word for "chief," it is both naba and soba in Mossi. Naba seems to be the word brought by the con-
● [192] quering Mossi-Dagomba group, while soba is probably the word that was used by the autochtonous population to designate chiefs.

645 Prior to the French conquest, the Moro Naba was surrounded by a certain number of ministers or eminent dignitaries who were given 1) specific duties /at court/, 2) in addition, part of the territory to govern. This is what accounted for provinces over and above the cantons, at least in those areas that were administered directly, but the heads of those provinces did not reside there. They lived at Ouagadougou, and were first and foremost ministers of the Moro Naba.

They were:

596 family in marriage. Likewise, the head of the family, assisted by the family council, settles all the little differences which arise between relatives. He also intervenes when a father fails to secure the obedience of one of his children or cannot manage to discipline him.

"It is he alone who must sacrifice animals for the benefit of the whole family when his relatives bring them to him on the occasion of family feasts.

"All the members of the family owe obedience to the family head. Likewise, they must show him the greatest respect.

"When the family elder dies, his younger brother becomes head of the family. When all his brothers have successively held this office, the eldest son of the eldest brother becomes the family head after the brothers, etc.

"Sometimes the head of the family does not live in the same village as the rest of the family. He may very well live with some of his sons or brothers, away from his other relatives, but his powers remain unchanged.

"In addition to the family head, there is the family council which is made up of all the men and old women of the family. This body has no well-defined role. It meets under the leadership of the family head to settle all matters concerning the family. The council would decide, for example, as to whether an incorrigible child should be sent to a naba /ruler/, as to who should intervene /229/ in case of a quarrel over an inheritance, who should seize the goods of a spendthrift in order to dole them out to him in proportion to his needs, etc."

592 351 The compound. —The Mossi compound consists of a certain number of round earthen huts or cabins surmounted by thatched roofs and huts for millet, all crowded into a rather narrow space cut by passages, hallways, small courtyards, etc. This complex is surrounded by a moderately high earth wall (two meters) which encircles the huts or cabins and encloses the compound.

592 361 The compounds are scattered over the plain, 50 or 100 meters apart. Some are larger than others; some have 15 or 20 huts or even more; others have but four or five (2).

192 2. To designate these compounds, the word soukala or sokalá is often used. This word is hallowed by custom in Yatenga, in the Ouagadougou area, in the Léo area, etc., in short, in all Mossi lands and their

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dependencies, as well as in the language of the European officials who inhabit the territory. Actually, the word sokala is not Mossi but Mandé /Mande/. In Bambara the hut is called so, in Malinké /Malinke/ sou. Soukala or sokala means exactly "the walls of the hut" (from kala, which means "bone" and by extension all elongated things, walls among them, and from so or sou, whose meaning we have learned already). This word was brought here from the shores of the Niger at the time of conquest. It is to some extent equivocal, for although it is usually given the meaning of "compound," some Europeans also use it to designate a whole quarter /a village subdivision including several compounds/. This is the meaning given to it by Delafosse (Le Haut-Sénégal-Niger /Upper Senegal-Niger/, Vol. 3, p. 126). As for myself, I always gave it the meaning of "compound" in my Noir du Soudan, that is to say, the meaning which I gave to the term carré or carrée in my monograph on the Noir de Guinée /The Black Population of (French) Guinea/. This word, however, and analogous words which are not strictly native to the region or whose French meaning is not absolutely clear lead to some confusion. We shall return to this subject later.

392 Let us add that the head of the compound is called zakasoba or irisoba (from zaka or iri, "compound," and soba, "chief, master"). Vadier incorrectly designated the head of the total family as zakasoba [596] in his monograph. The head of the total family is the boudoukasaman. The zakasoba is the head of a compound, of a home, of that cluster of huts and millet granaries encircled by a red wall which makes such a distinct and isolated unit on the Mossi plains.

This compound accommodates varying numbers of people, 18 or 19 being the average (with exceptions), as we have seen above.